

In the Claims

Claims 1, 19, 37 and 37-43 are amended as follows.

1. (Currently amended) A method of distributing a contact across a network having a number of nodes which are equipped to service contacts, comprising the steps of:
 - a) generating a contact information entity which is accessible across the network and which comprises information sufficient to enable each node to determine whether it has the resources to service the contact, one or more of said nodes being a contact center having a plurality of agents for servicing contacts, each agent having identified skills, whereby said contact center can determine whether its agents can service a given contact, based on said contact information entity and the identified skills of the contact center's agents;
 - b) assessing one or more bids issued by one or more nodes to determine a bid to be used in assigning the contact; and
 - c) on the basis of said determination, assigning said contact to the node which issued said bid.
2. (Cancelled)
3. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 1, wherein said contact information entity is a software object generated in a network accessible space.
4. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 3, wherein said network accessible space is a shared memory space, optionally implemented using JavaSpaces (TM) technology.
5. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 3, wherein the step of generating said contact information entity further comprises replicating said object in a plurality of said shared memory spaces.
6. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 1, wherein said contact information entity is an entry in a database accessible across a network.
7. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 1, wherein said bids are issued by the nodes and transmitted directly to a resource on the network which is responsible for assessing the one or more bids.

8. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 1, wherein said bids are issued by the nodes to an area of the network which is accessible by a resource on the network which is responsible for assessing the one or more bids.
9. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 1, wherein said contact information entity identifies at least one skillset required to service the contact.
10. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 1, wherein said contact information entity identifies at least one parameter according to which bids will be assessed.
11. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 10, wherein said at least one parameter is selected from a cost metric, a skillset proficiency metric, and a metric identifying the time within which the contact is to be serviced.
12. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 1, wherein said contact information entity is a software entity which includes a set of rules according to which a bid score is returned by the contact information entity upon receipt of one or more bid values.
13. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 12, wherein said step of assessing one or more bids comprises evaluating the bid scores returned by the contact information entity.
14. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 1, wherein said contact information entity is a software entity which includes executable logic according to which a bid score is returned by the contact information entity upon receipt of one or more bid values.
15. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 14, wherein the executable logic is provided as an object oriented command pattern.
16. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 1, wherein said step of assessing one or more bids comprises maintaining a single winning bid, evaluating each new bid as it issues from a node and either discarding the new bid if it is determined to be inferior to the winning bid according to predetermined criteria or substituting it as the new winning bid if it is determined to be better than the previous winning bid.

17. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 16, wherein said step of assessing one or more bids comprises collecting all bids which issue within a timeout period and determining which of these bids is to be used in assigning the contact.

18. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 1, wherein one or more of said nodes is a computer of a user connected to the network, whereby said user may make a determination as to whether he or she has the skills to service said contact and as to whether or not to issue a bid.

19. (Currently amended) A method of obtaining contacts across a network from a contact source, comprising the steps, carried out by a contact center having a plurality of agents for servicing contacts, each agent having identified skills, of:

- a) receiving via the network contact information which comprises information sufficient to enable said contact center to determine whether it has the resources to service the contact;
- b) issuing a bid to the contact source offering to service the contact based on said information; and
- c) in the event that the bid is successful, receiving the contact from the contact source.

20. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 19, wherein said contact information is provided in a software object generated in a network accessible space.

21. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 19, wherein said network accessible space is a shared memory space, optionally implemented using JavaSpaces (TM) technology.

22. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 20, wherein the step of generating said contact information entity further comprises replicating said object in a plurality of said shared memory spaces.

23. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 22, wherein said contact information entity is a JavaSpace entry and the step of receiving the contact information comprises reading said entries from a JavaSpace.

24. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 23, wherein the step of issuing a bid comprises modifying said entry and writing the modified entry in a JavaSpace.

25. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 23, wherein the step of issuing a bid comprises generating a new entry including a reference which relates the new entry to the original contact information entity, and writing the new entry to a JavaSpace.

26. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 19, wherein said contact information entity is an entry in a database accessible across a network.

27. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 19, wherein said bid is issued by the node and transmitted directly to a resource on the network which is responsible for assessing the one or more bids.

28. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 19, wherein said bid is issued by the node to an area of the network which is accessible by a resource on the network which is responsible for assessing the one or more bids.

29. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 19, wherein said contact information identifies at least one skillset required to service the contact.

30. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 19, wherein said contact information identifies at least one parameter according to which bids will be assessed.

31. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 30, wherein said at least one parameter is selected from a cost metric, a skillset proficiency metric, and a metric identifying the time within which the contact is to be serviced.

32. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 19, wherein said contact information is provided in a software entity which includes a set of rules according to which a bid score is returned by the software entity upon receipt of one or more bid values.

33. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 19, wherein said contact information entity is a software entity which includes executable logic according to which a bid score is returned by the contact information entity upon receipt of one or more bid values.

34. (Currently amended) A method of distributing contacts across a network having a plurality of connected contact centres, each contact center having a plurality of agents for servicing contacts, each agent having identified skills, comprising the steps of:

- a) upon receipt of a contact by a contact centre, publishing information relating to the contact over the network;
- b) awaiting one or more bids from remote contact centres offering to service the contact;
- c) determining from said bids a destination for the contact; and
- d) forwarding the contact to said destination.

35. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 34, wherein said destination is a remote contact centre which issued one or more of said bids.

36. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 34, wherein said destination is a local contact queue of the contact centre which received the contact.

37. (Currently amended) An apparatus for distributing a contact across a network having a number of nodes which are equipped to service contacts, comprising:

- a) a contact information generator for generating a contact information entity which is accessible across the network and which comprises information sufficient to enable each node to determine whether it has the resources to service the contact, one or more of said nodes being a contact center having a plurality of agents for servicing contacts, each agent having identified skills, whereby said contact center can determine whether its agents can service a given contact, based on said contact information entity and the identified skills of the contact center's agents;
- b) a bid assessment module for assessing one or more bids issued by one or more nodes to determine a bid to be used in assigning the contact; and
- c) contact assignment means for, on the basis of said determination, assigning said contact to the node which issued said bid.

38. (Currently amended) An apparatus for obtaining contacts across a network from a contact source, comprising:

- a) a network connection for receiving via the network contact information;
- b) an evaluation module for evaluating said contact information to determine whether a node associated with said apparatus has the resources to service the contact, said node being a contact center having a plurality of agents for servicing contacts, each agent having identified skills, whereby said evaluation module can determine whether the agents of the contact center can service said contact, based on said contact information entity and the identified skills of the contact center's agents; and
- c) a bid generation unit for issuing a bid to the contact source offering to service the contact based on said information.

39. (Currently amended) A contact centre comprising:

- a) a network connection for distributing contacts to one or more other contact centres;
- b) a contact manager for controlling contacts received at the contact centre from one or more communications networks and distributing said contacts among a plurality of agents based on the requirements of the contact and identified skills of the agents;
- c) a contact information generator for generating a contact information entity which is accessible across the network and which comprises information sufficient to enable each node to determine whether it has the resources to service a contact;
- d) a bid assessment module for assessing one or more bids issued by one or more nodes to determine a bid to be used in assigning the contact; and
- e) contact assignment means for, on the basis of said determination, assigning said contact to the node which issued said bid.

40. (Currently amended) A network having a plurality of connected contact centres, wherein at least one of said contact centres comprises:

- a) a network connection for distributing contacts to one or more other contact centres;
- b) a contact manager for controlling contacts received at the contact centre from one or more communications networks and distributing said contacts among a plurality of agents based on the requirements of the contact and identified skills of the agents;
- c) a contact information generator for generating a contact information entity which is accessible across the network and which comprises information sufficient to enable each node to determine whether it has the resources to service a contact;

- d) a bid assessment module for assessing one or more bids issued by one or more nodes to determine a bid to be used in assigning the contact; and
- e) contact assignment means for, on the basis of said determination, assigning said contact to the node which issued said bid.

41. (Currently amended) A computer program product comprising instructions in machine readable form which when executed by a computer associated with a contact centre are effective to cause said computer to:

- a) generate a contact information entity which is accessible across the network and which comprises information sufficient to enable each of a plurality of nodes to determine whether it has the resources to service the contact, one or more of said nodes being a contact center having a plurality of agents for servicing contacts, each agent having identified skills, whereby said contact center can determine whether its agents can service a given contact, based on said contact information entity and the identified skills of the contact center's agents;
- b) assess one or more bids issued by one or more nodes to determine a bid to be used in assigning the contact; and
- c) on the basis of said determination, assign said contact to the node which issued said bid.

42. (Currently amended) A computer program product comprising instructions in machine readable form which when executed by a computer associated with a contact centre are effective to cause said computer to:

- a) receive via the network contact information which comprises information sufficient to enable a node to determine whether it has the resources to service the contact, said node being a contact center having a plurality of agents for servicing contacts, each agent having identified skills, whereby said evaluation module can determine whether the agents of the contact center can service said contact, based on said contact information entity and the identified skills of the contact center's agents;
- b) issue a bid to the contact source offering to service the contact based on said information; and
- c) in the event that the bid is successful, receive the contact from the contact source.

43. (Currently amended) A data carrier encoded with a machine-readable computer software object, said computer software object encoding contact information and comprising:

- a) information identifying a node which controls the contact;
- b) information identifying one or more characteristics of the contact, whereby said contact may be matched with an agent of a contact center having identified skills to service said contact; and
- c) information identifying one or more parameters for which bids are sought by said node, such that a different node may bid to have control of the contact transferred to it.